

sent to Irene Compton 26/9/86

26th September, 1986.

Following are a few notes on the Spinal Injuries Unit at the Royal North Shore Hospital during a period of twenty-two years 1961-1983 when I was Charge-Sister and later Supervisor. There were two contrasting periods- 15 years in the old section known as "The Cottages" and 7 years in the present new building.

The Cottages consisted of four wooden buildings, with corrugated iron roof, louvre windows on the covered way approaching the old Thoracic building.

Cottages 1 - one large area with 7 beds and adjoining bathroom.

Cottage 2 - one room very crowded with 4 beds.

(Sister May Lamberton's office was in a back room of this cottage- later when the office was built onto the front of Cottage 2 this room became a bathroom.

Cottage 3 - This consisted of rooms for patients in wheel-chairs as the door-ways were not wide enough to move beds in and out.

5 of the patients in this cottage were convalescents who were sent across from the male surgical ward. Later, the closed in verandah used for these patients was used as extra Physiotherapy space and an office for the Social worker.

A cottage next to No.3 was used for the Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy Departments. Patients received more treatment if the weather was fine as much work had to be done on the lawn due to lack of space.

The above ground swimming pool provided enjoyable therapy.

Each day it was my duty to check the functioning of the Iron-lung in an adjoining cottage.

Patients average stay: Quadriplegics (Paralysis involving 4 limbs)
18 months or longer

WAS

Paraplegics (Paralysis involving lower limbs)
12 months.

Many hospitals in the city and country areas were nursing spinal injured patients for long periods waiting for a vacancy in the Spinal Unit.

[Beds were wheeled outside on to the lawn and much effort was made by staff to create a pleasant environment ~~xxx~~ for the long period of hospitalisation.]

The cottages were hot in summer and cold in winter. During excessive heat and before air-conditioning was installed in the area we hosed the patients with the garden hose to cool them down and prevent heat exhaustion which is very common in quadriplegics.

The ordinary hospital bed was too high for patients to transfer to wheel-chairs so the wheels were removed. Many pillows were used in positioning the patients and the work was made lighter when we were able to purchase manually operated and electrically operated beds. These beds could be raised and lowered to different heights and also enable one person to sit the patient up in bed. Donations were given for these beds by the R.N.S.H. Graduate Nurses Ass'n, R.N.S.H. Ladies' Committee and many other outside organisations.

Fire was always a hazard and my most vivid memory is when Ether soap used for cleaning purposes was left in the toilet bowl. ~~xxx~~ One of the patients could smell the ether when he wheeled in and sat on the toilet. His first thought was to get rid of his cigarette which he put into the bowl - the ether soap ignited - flames sprang up ~~and~~ the patient moved faster than he had ever moved! Fortunately he received only minor burns.

The patients who were up in chairs sat at a large table in the centre of Cottage 1 for meals. They were an encouragement for those in bed and there was a real concern for one another. This extended to the families as everyone was in close proximity and this was conducive to mutual support. I cannot speak too highly of Miss Pirie and her catering staff in sending to the Unit special food. When Banana fritters were taken to the dining-room in Vindin House for the nurses a tray came to us - steak was always a treat. Most patients had a birthday in hospital and an Ice-cream cake was always provided.

The meals were served from the day-room by the Sister and taken to the patient by the nurses. Sleeves had to be rolled down and cuffs put on. Extra help from relatives and friends was always appreciated as so many of the patients had to be assisted with ~~feeding~~. ~~Feeding~~. The nurses collected the trays and left them in the Day-room for the wardsmen to wash up. They were left for some time in the evenings and this is when the Possum had his tea! It was ~~almost~~ impossible to shoo him out - He lived above the office and would sometimes peer at us through a hole in the ceiling. We had a cat who delivered kittens in a cupboard and so it was a "home away from home" for many.

The Christmas Party catered for by the hospital was "the event of the year". Ex-patients and their families returned - many friends met. Staff renewed acquaintances and for so many of the people in wheel-chairs it was the highlight of their year. I was grateful to the Minister for Health and our Medical Superintendent and Director of Nursing for always attending. This function had to cease when we were in the new building as the numbers had grown too many for us to accommodate.

[Before the second stage building was opened in 1964 our out-patients would come to the Unit every Wednesday morning for their medical check. I had to ask the in-patients who were up "May I borrow your bed for an out-patient?" Six was the most we could cope with and they would stay for lunch and talk to the patients and this was good for the in-patients to see that the future was not quite so bleak as it looked from the hospital bed.]

Many outings were arranged - picnics- theatre parties etc. Len Goulding would drive the hospital truck with the chairs and staff would use their cars for the patients. One day we took a patient on a trolley to Bradley's Head on the back of the truck accompanied by a wardman. (Photo enclosed)

In 1966 a patient was flown down from Bourke on the last Catalina flight before the Air Ambulance came into operation. This lady was suffering from Quadriplegia and pregnant. A few weeks later a baby son was delivered in Cottage 2.

Sport for the Disabled plays a very important role in Rehabilitation. Annual Games have been organised by the Spinal Unit Team for 26 years. These take place on the Oval adjoining the hospital. Many beds and trolleys have been pushed up and down the hill to the Sports to watch the wheel-chair competitors many of whom have reached Olympic standard. Many of the staff have attended National and International Games as escorts.

[Seven hundred patients were nursed in the cottages under difficult conditions. I pay tribute to Sisters May Lamberton, ^(MRS BARTLE) Rosemary Seymour-Price, Sue Oldroyd, Rosalie Pratt and many others who were exceptional in their care of patients and teaching to the staff and ~~xx~~ relatives. The nursing staff were part of a large team whose excellence never diminished.]

[Lectures were given to hundreds of nurses from major Sydney hospitals. Practical experience was given to District Nurse from city and country areas, Air ambulance sisters, ambulance officers and overseas students.]

a much reduced length of stay in hospital.

I have seen many changes including the early admission of the acute injury, the introduction of a post basic Spinal Injuries nursing course, the appointment of a Home-training Sister, the availability of Hostel type accommodation for the discharged patient. Thousands of school children have received instruction from the Prevention and Awareness Team based in the Spinal Unit and modern electronic diagnostic and other equipment is used as part of the ongoing research programme.

Nancy Joyce.